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ABSTRACT

Twenty-seven female welfare recipients who had been forced to enroll in a career and life planning class or lose their welfare benefits were observed in class for 1 month in 1972. Five to 6 months after the class, 15 of the women were interviewed in informal small group and one-on-one conversations and formal open-ended individual interviews focusing on their learning experiences, activities since the class, progress toward their identified goals, previous educational history and perception of skills, plans for the future, and reasons for being on welfare. Among the key findings of the study were the following: (1) female welfare recipients required to participate in welfare reform educational programs soon discovered strong personal motivations to continue their literacy training; (2) participation in the education program improved the female welfare recipients' self-esteem, perceptions of their skills, interest in future education, and views of their job prospects; and (3) the welfare reform educational program worked because it focused on developing and changing the ways in which the participants perceived themselves and their educational opportunities. It was concluded that requiring welfare recipients to return to school is a potentially powerful tool for improving their job prospects and thereby reducing their dependence on public assistance. (MN)

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BRIEF

Motivations for Learning: Voices of Women Welfare Reform Participants

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Based on NCAL Technical Report TR93-10
NOVEMBER 1993
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KEY FINDINGS:

- ❑ The stigma of dropping out of school and being on welfare, as well as internalized societal messages about self-worth, inhibit many welfare recipients from going back to school.
- ❑ Women welfare recipients required to participate in a welfare reform educational program soon discovered strong personal motivations to continue their literacy training.
- ❑ Follow-up interviews showed that participation in the education program improved the welfare women's self-esteem, their perceptions of their skills, their interest in future education, and their views of their job prospects.
- ❑ The welfare reform educational program worked because it focused on developing and changing the ways that the participants perceived themselves and their educational opportunities.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ❑ The use of incentives (in this case, the threat of a benefits cut-off) can significantly help overcome the initial reluctance on the part of many welfare beneficiaries to participate in adult education.
- ❑ Requiring welfare recipients to go back to school is a potentially powerful tool to improve their job prospects and thereby reduce their dependence on public assistance.
- ❑ To keep welfare recipients in school and to facilitate their subsequent learning, adult education programs should (a) address and enhance individuals' self-awareness and self-esteem, (b) help them articulate their personal life goals and make the programs congruent with those goals, and (c) enhance their sense of control over their environments.

INTRODUCTION

Adults are increasingly impelled to upgrade their skills. For working adults, this is due to the changing demands of the global economy. For those on public assistance, this is due to the restructuring of the welfare system, which increasingly requires participation in adult education programs in the hope of reducing chronic dependence. The latter development provides an opportunity to examine what motivates adults to improve their literacy skills. Because the education track of welfare reform is a mandated program, it might include a large percentage of "reluctant" participants, and it is this "nonparticipant" perspective that has been lacking in much of the earlier research on motivation in adult literacy participation.

This report describes a group of female welfare recipients and their experiences in and perceptions of a mandated adult education program. It looks into the life contexts of these women—schooling, family and relationships, work, and welfare—and how these have shaped their concepts of self, their perceptions of their abilities, and their views of the future.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed qualitative methodology in order to provide a deeper and more grounded understanding of how individuals create and recognize the multiple meanings of literacy in their lives.

Twenty-seven female participants in a Career and Life Planning class in the Pacific Northwest were observed in class for one month in 1992. Five to six months after the class, 15 of the 27 were interviewed in (a) informal small group and one-on-one conversations and (b) formal, open-ended individual interviews. Topics covered included (a) learning experiences, activities since the class, and progress toward goals identified in class; (b) previous

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educational history and perception of skills; (c) plans for future training and perceptions of future opportunities; and (d) reasons for being on welfare.

IMPLICATIONS

Although the majority of the women had gone back to school only because they would otherwise have lost their welfare benefits, as the class progressed, they expressed or discovered a variety of other motivations for participating: (a) the opportunity to be independent and to find better jobs; (b) their children's well-being; (c) the need to be good role models for their children; and (d) self-improvement. These motivations are in fact very similar to those of adult basic education students in non-welfare contexts.

The experiences of these women show that nearly all adults are motivated to learn in some context, but that some need an initial and/or extra push. Hence, forcing welfare participants to do something they would not normally do (i.e., enrolling in adult education) can be good for them and the economy because it will, in the long run, reduce their dependence on government support and, in turn, ease budgetary pressures.

FURTHER READING

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